The King Goes A-Begging

By Robert Barr

LITERARY ambition has before now led men into difficulties. The king had completed a poem in thirteen stanzas entitled "The Beggar Man," and the prime requisite of a completed poem is an audience to listen to it.

Like every other literary man, it was praise and not criticism that James wanted; still he preferred to have such praise from the lips of one who knew something of the life he tried to sing; therefore, as evening came on the monarch dressed himself in his farmer costume and taking his thirteen stanzas with him, ventured upon a cautious visit to his friend the cobbler in the lower town of Stirling.

The cobbler listened with an attention which was in itself flattering and paid his royal visitor the additional compliment of asking him to repeat certain of the verses, which the king in his own heart thought were the best Then when the thirteenth stanza was arrived at, with the "No-that-bad" commendation which is dear to the heart of the chary Scotchman, be he of high or low degree, Flemming continued:

"They might be worse, and we've had many a poet of great reputation in Scotland who would not be ashamed to father them. But I'm thinking you paint the existence of a beggar in brighter colors than the life itself warrants."

"No, no, Flemming," protested the king earnestly. "I'm convinced that only the beggar knows what the contentment is. You see, he begins at the very bottom of the ladder and every step he takes must be a step upward. Now imagine a man at the top, like myself; any move I make in the way of changing my condition must be downward. A beggar is the real king, and king is but a beggar, for he holds his position by the favor of others. You see, Flemming, anything a beggar gets is so much to the good, and, as he has nothing to lose, not even his head—for who would send a beggar to the block? —he must needs be therefore the most contented man on the face of the footstool."

"Well, in so far as concerns myself, your majesty, I'd like to be sure of a roof over my head when the rain's coming down, and of that a beggar can never be. A king or a cobbler has a place to lay his head, at any rate."

"Aye," admitted the king, "but sometimes that place is the block. To tell you the truth, Flemming, I'm thinking of taking a week at the begging myself. A poet should have practical knowledge of the subject about which he writes. Give me a week on the road, Flemming, and I'll pen you a poem on beggary that will get warmer praise from you than this has had."

"Does your majesty intend to go alone?"

"Entirely alone, Flemming. Bless me, do you imagine I would tramp the country as a beggar with a troop of horse at my back?"

"Your majesty would be wise to think twice of such a project," warned the cobbler.

"Oh, well, I've doubled the number: I've thought four times about it; once when I was writing the poem and three times while you were raising objections to my assertion that the beggar is the happiest man on earth."

"If your majesty's mind is fixed, then there's no more to be said. But take my advice and put a belt round your body with a number of gold pieces in it, for the time may come when you'll want a horse in a hurry, and perhaps you may be refused lodgings even when you greatly need them: in either case a few gold rascals will stand your friend."

"That's canny counsel, Flemming, and I'll act on it."

And thus it came about that the king of Scotland, with a belt of gold around his waist in case of need, and garments concealing the belt which gave little indication that anything worth a robber's care was underneath, tramped the high roads and byways of a part of Scotland, finding in general welcome wherever he went, for he could tell a story that would bring a laugh and sing a song that would bring a tear, and all such rarely starve or lack shelter in this sympathetic world.

Only once did he feel himself in danger, and that was on what he thought to be the last day of his tramp, for in the evening he expected to reach the lower town of Stirling, even though he came to it late in the night. But the weather of Scotland has always something to say to the pedestrian, and it delights in upsetting his plans.

He was still more than two leagues from his castle, and the dark forest of Torwood lay between him and royal Stirling, when toward the end of a lowering day there came up over the hills to the west one of the fiercest storms he had ever beheld, which drove him for shelter to a wayside inn on the outskirts of the forest. The place of shelter was low and forbidding enough, but needs must when a Scottish storm drives, and the king burst in on a drinking company, bringing a swirl of rain and a blast of wind with him: so fierce in truth was the wind that one of the drinkers had to spring to his feet and put his shoulder to the door before the king could get it closed again. He found but scant welcome in the company. Those seated on the benches by the fire scowled at him; and the landlord, seeing he was but a beggar, did not limit his displeasure to so silent a censure.

"What in the fiend's name," he cried angrily, "does the like of you want in here?"

The king nonchalantly shook the water from his rags and took a step nearer the fire.

"That is a very unnecessary question, landlord," said the young man with a smile, "nevertheless, I will answer it. I want shelter in the first place, and food and drink as soon as you can bring them."

"I'll take your order for a meal when I have seen the color of your money."

"Quite right," said the king, "and only fair Scottish caution." Then with a lack of that quality he had just commended, he drew his belt out from under his coat, and taking a gold piece from it, threw the coin on the table.

The entrance of the king and the manner of his reception exposed him to the danger almost sure to attend the display of so much wealth in such forbidding company. A moment later he realized the jeopardy in which his rashness had placed him, by the significant glances which the half-dozen rough men there seated gave to each other. He was alone and unarmed in a disreputable bothy on the edge of a forest, well known as the refuge of desperate characters.

When the time came to retire, his host brought the king by a ladder to a loft which occupied the whole length of the building, and muttered something about the others sleeping here as well, but thanked heaven there was room enough for an army.

"This will not do for me," said the beggar, coming down again. "I'll take to the storm first. What is this chamber leading out from the taproom?"

"That is my own," replied the landlord, with some return of his old incivility, "and I'll give it up to no beggar."

The king without answering opened the door of the chamber and found himself in a room that could be barricaded. Taking a light with him he examined it more minutely.

"Is this matchlock loaded?" he asked, pointing to a clumsy gun which had doubtless caused the death of more than one deer in the forest.

The landlord answered in surly fashion that it was, but the king tested the point for himself.

"Now," he said, "I rest here, and you will see that I am not disturbed. Any man who attempts to enter this room gets the contents of this gun in him, and I'll trust to my two daggers to take care of the rest."

He had no dagger with him, but he spoke for the benefit of the company in the taproom. Something in his resolute manner seemed to impress the landlord, who grumbled, muttering half to himself and half to his companions, but he nevertheless retired, leaving the king alone, whereupon James fortified the door, and afterward slept unmolested the sleep of a tired man, until broad day woke him.

"Which way may your honor be journeying?" asked the innkeeper, "for I see that you are no beggar."

"I am no beggar at such an inhospitable house as this," replied the wayfarer, "but elsewhere I am a beggar —that is to say, the gold I come by is asked for and not earned."

"Ah, that's it, is it?" said the other with a nod, "but for such a trade you need your weapons by your side."

"The deadliest weapons," rejoined the king, mysteriously, "are not always those most plainly on view. The sting of the wasp is generally felt before it is seen."

The landlord was plainly disturbed by the intelligence he had received, and now made some ado to get the change for the gold piece, but his guest replied airily that it did not matter.

"With whatever's coming to me," he said, "feed the next beggar that applies to you on a rainy night with less at his belt to commend him than I have."

"Well, good day to you, and thank you," said the innkeeper. "If you're going Stirling way, you road's straight through the forest, and when you come to St. Ninians you'll be in time to see a fine hanging, for they're throttling Baldy Hutchinson today, the biggest man between here and the border —yes, and beyond it, I warrant."

"That will be interesting," replied the King. "Good day to you."

Entering the forest at last, he relaxed no precaution, but kept to the middle of the road with his stout stick ready in his hand. At the second turning five stalwart ruffians fell upon him, two armed with knives and three with cudgels. The King's early athletic training was to be put to a practical test. His first action was to break the wrist of one of the scoundrels who held a knife, but before he could pay any attention to any of the others he had received two or three resounding blows from the cudgels, and now was fully occupied warding off their strokes, backing down the road to keep his assailants in front of him. His great agility gave him an advantage over the comparative clumsiness of the four yokels who pressed him, but he was well aware that any unguarded blow might have lay him at their mercy. He was more afraid of the single knife than of the three clubs, and, springing through a fortunate opening, was delighted to crack the crown of the man who held the blade, stretching him helpless in a cart rut. The three who remained seemed in no way disheartened by the discomfiture of their comrades, but came on with greater fury. The King retreated and retreated, baffling their evident desire to get in his rear, and thus the fighting four came to the corner of the road that James had passed a short time previously. One of the trio got in a nasty crack on the top of the beggar's bonnet, which brought him to his knees, and before he could recover his footing a blow on the shoulder felled him.

At this critical juncture there rose a wild shout down the road, for the fighting party, in coming round the turn, had brought themselves within view of a sturdy pedestrian forging along at a great pace, which he nevertheless marvelously accelerated on seeing the melee. For a moment the dazed man on the ground thought that the landlord had come to his rescue, but it was not so. It seemed as if a remnant of the storm swept like a whirlwind among the aggressors, for the newcomer in the fray, with savage exclamations which showed his delight in a tumult, scattered the enemy as a tornado drives before it the leaves of a forest. The King raised himself on his elbow and watched the gigantic stranger lay about him with his stick, while the five, with cries of terror, disappeared into the forest, for the two that were prostrated had now recovered wind enough to run.

"Losh," panted the giant, returning to the man on the road, "I wish I'd been here at the beginning."

"Thank goodness you came at the end," said the king, staggering unsteadily to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" asked the stranger.

"I'm not just sure yet," replied the king, removing his bonnet and rubbing the top of his head with a circular movement of his hand.

"What's wrong wi' those scamps to lay on a poor beggar man?" asked the stranger.

"Nothing, except that the beggar man is not so poor as he looks, and has a belt of gold about him which he was foolish enough to show last night at the inn where these lads were drinking."

"Then the lesson hasn't taught you much, or you wouldn't say that to a complete stranger in the middle of a black forest, and you alone with him—that is, unless they've succeeded in reiving the belt away from you?"

"No, they have not robbed me, and to show you that I am not such a fool as you take me for, I may add that the moment you came up I resolved to give to my rescuer every gold piece that is in my belt. So, you see, if you thought of robbing me, there's little use in taking by force what a man is more than willing to give you of his own free will."

The giant threw back his head and the wood resounded with his laughter.

"What I have said seems to amuse you," said the king, not too well pleased at the boisterous merriment of his companion.

"It does that," replied the stranger, still struggling with his mirth; then, striking the king on the shoulder, he continued: "I suppose there is not another man in all broad Scotland today but me that wouldn't give the snap of his finger for all the gold you ever carried."

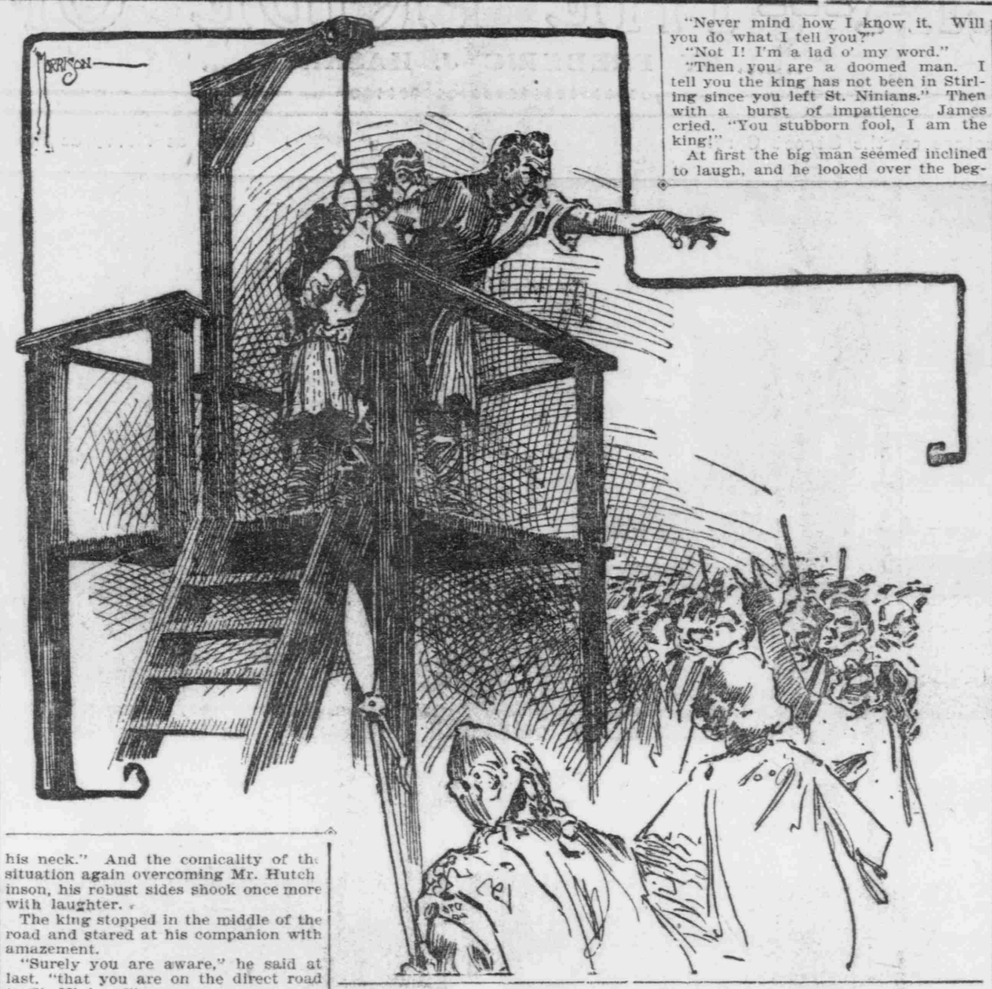
"Then you must be wealthy," commented the king. "Yet it can't be that, for the richest men I know are the greediest."

"No, it isn't that," rejoined the stranger, "but if you wander anywhere about this region you will understand what I mean when I tell you that I'm Baldy Hutchinson."

"Baldy Hutchinson!" echoed the king, wrinkling his brows, trying to remember where he had heard that name before. Then, with sudden enlightenment:

"What, not the man who is to be hanged today at St. Ninians?"

"The very same; so you see that all the gold ever minted is of little use to a man with a tightening rope around his neck." And the comicality of the situation again overcoming Mr. Hutchinson, his robust sides shook once more with laughter.



The king stopped in the middle of the road and stared at his companion with amazement.

"Surely you are aware," he said at last, "that you are on the direct road to St. Ninians?"

"Surely, surely," replied Baldy, "and you remind me that we must not stand yammering here, for there will be a great gathering there to see the hanging. All my friends are there now, and if I say it, who shouldn't, I've more friends than possibly any other man in this part of Scotland."

"But do you mean that you are going voluntarily to your own hanging? Bless my soul, man, turn in your tracks and make for across the border."

Hutchinson shook his head.

"If I had intended to do that," he said, "I could have saved myself many a long step yesterday and this morning, for I was a good deal nearer the border than I am at this moment. No, no. You see, I have passed my word. The sheriff gave me a week among my own friends to settle my worldly affairs and bid my wife and bairns good-bye. So I said to the sheriff: 'I'm your man whenever you are ready for the hanging.'"

"I've heard many a strange tale," said the king, "but this beats anything in my experience."

"Oh, there's a great deal to be picked up by tramping the roads," replied Hutchinson sagely.

"What is your crime?" inquired his majesty.

"Oh, the crime's neither here nor there. If they want to hang a man they'll ham him, crime or no crime."

"But why should they want to hang a man with so many friends?"

"Well, you see, a man may have many friends and yet two or three powerful enemies. My crime, as you call it, is that I'm related to the Douglases. That's the real crime. But that's not what I'm to be hanged for. Oh, no, it's all done according to the legal satisfaction of the lawyers. I'm hanged for treason to the king."

"But surely," exclaimed the beggar, "they will not hang a man in Scotland for merely saying a hasty word against the king?"

"There's more happens in this realm than the king kens of, and all done in his name, too. But, to speak truth, there was a bit extra against me as well. A wheen of the daft bodies in Stirling made up a slip of a plot to trap the king and put him in hiding for awhile until he listened to what they called reason. There were two weavers among them, and weavers are always plotting; a cobbler and such like people, and they sent word would I come and help them. I was fool enough to write them a note and intrusted it to their messenger. I told them to leave the king alone until I came to Stirling, and then I would just nab him myself, put him under my oxter and walk down toward the border with him, for I knew that if they went on they'd but lose their silly heads. And so, wishing no harm to the king, I made my way to Stirling, but did not get within a mile of it, for they tripped me up at St. Ninians, having captured my letter. So I was sentenced, and it seems the king found out all about their plot, as I knew he would, and pardoned the men who were going to kidnap him, while the man who wanted to stop such foolishness is to be hanged in his name."

"That seems villainously unfair," said the beggar. "Didn't the eleven try to do anything for you?"

"How do you know there were eleven?" cried Hutchinson, turning around upon him.

"I thought you said eleven."

"Well, maybe I did; maybe I did. Yes, there were eleven of them. They never got my letter. Their messenger was a traitor, as is usually the case, and merely told them I would have nothing to do with their foolish venture; and that brings me to the point I have been coming to. The moment they set me at liberty, a week since, I got a messenger I could trust and sent him to the cobbler, Flemming by name. I told Flemming I was to be hanged, but he had still a week to get me a reprieve. I asked him to go to the king and tell him the whole truth of the matter, so I'm thinking that a pardon will be on the scaffold there before me. Still, the disappointment of the hundreds waiting to see the hanging will be great."

"Good God!" cried the beggar aghast, stopping dead in the middle of the road and regarding his comrade with horror.

"What's wrong with you?" asked the big man, stopping also.

"Has it never occurred to you that the king may be away from the palace and no one in the place able to find him?"

"No one able to find the King of Scotland? That's an unheard of thing."

"Listen to me, Hutchinson. Let us avoid St. Ninians and go direct to Stirling. It's only a mile or two further on. Let us see the cobbler before running your neck into a noose."

"But, man, the cobbler will be at St. Ninians, either with a pardon or to see me hanged, like the good friend he is."

"Never mind how I know it. Will you do what I tell you?"

"Not I! I'm a lad o' my word."

"Then you are a doomed man. I tell you the king has not been in Stirling since you left St. Ninians." Then with a burst of impatience James cried, "You stubborn fool, I am the king!"

At first the big man seemed inclined to laugh, and he looked over the beggar from top to toe, but presently an expression of pity overspread his countenance, and he spoke soothingly to his comrade.

"There will be no pardon at St. Ninians. Let us to Stirling; let us to Stirling. I know that the king has not been at home for a week past."

"How can you know that?"

"Yes, yes, my man," he said. "I know you were the king from the very first. Just sit down on this stone for a minute and let me examine that clip you got on the top of the head. I fear it's worse than I thought it was."

"Nonsense," cried the king, "my head is perfectly right; it is yours that is gone aglee."

"True enough, true enough," continued Hutchinson mildly, in the tone that he would have used toward a fractious child, "and you are not the first that's said it. But let us get on to St. Ninians."

"No, let us make direct for Stirling."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," continued Hutchinson in the same tone of exasperating tolerance. "I'll to St. Ninians and let them know the king's pardon's coming. You'll trot along to Stirling, put on your king's clothes and then come and set me free. That's the way we'll arrange it, my manuie."

The king made a gesture of despair, but remained silent, and they walked rapidly down the road together. They had quitted the forest, and the village of St. Ninians was now in view. As they approached the place more nearly Hutchinson was pleased to see that a great crowd had gathered to view the hanging. He seemed to take this as a personal compliment to himself; as an evidence of his popularity.

The two made their way to the back of the great assemblage, where a few soldiers guarded an inclosure, within which was the anxious sheriff and his minor officials.

"Bless me, Baldy!" cried the sheriff in a tone of great relief, "I thought you had given me the slip."

"Ye thought naething o' the kind, sheriff," rejoined Baldy complacently, "I said I would be here, and here I am."

"You are just late enough," grumbled the sheriff. "The people have been waiting this two hours."

"They'll think it all the better when they see it," commented Baldy. "I was held back a bit on the road. Has there no message come from the king?"

"Could you expect it, when the crime's treason?" asked the sheriff impatiently, "but there's been a cobbler here that's given me more bother than twenty kings, and cannot be pacified. He says the king's away from Stirling, and this execution must be put by for another ten days, which is impossible."

"Allow me a word in your ear privately," said the beggar to the sheriff.

"I'll see you after the job's done," replied the badgered man. "I have no more places to give away: you must just stand your chances with the mob."

Baldy put his open hand to the side of his mouth and whispered to the sheriff:

"This beggar man," he said, "has been misused by a gang of thieves in Torwood forest."

"I cannot attend to that now," rejoined the sheriff, with increasing irritation.

"No, no," continued Baldy suavely, "it's no that, but he's got a frightful dunner on the top o' the head, and he thinks he's the king."

"I am the king," cried the beggar, overhearing the last word of caution, "and I warn you, sir, that you proceed with this execution at your peril. I am James of Scotland, and I forbid the hanging."

At this moment there broke through the insufficient military guard a wild, unkempt figure, whose appearance caused trepidation to the already much-tried sheriff.

"There's the crazy cobbler again," he moaned dejectedly. "Now the fat's all in the fire. I think I'll hang the three of them, trial or no trial."

"Oh, your majesty!" cried the cobbler—and it was hard to say which of the two was the more disreputable in appearance—"this man Hutchinson is innocent. You will surely not allow the hanging to take place, now you are here."

"I'll not allow it, if I can prevent it, and can get this fool of a sheriff to listen."

"Fool of a sheriff, say you!" stuttered that official in rising anger. "Here, guard, take these two ragamuffins into custody, and see that they are kept quiet till this hanging's done with. Hutchinson, get up on the scaffold; this is all your fault. Hangman, do your duty."

Baldy Hutchinson, begging the cobbler to make no further trouble, then mounted the steps, leading to the platform, the hangman close behind him. Before the guard could lay hands on the king, he sprang also up the steps, and took the place on the outward edge of the scaffold. Raising his hand, he demanded silence.

"I am James, King of Scotland," he proclaimed in stentorian tones. "I command you as loyal subjects to depart to your homes. There will be no execution today. The King reprieves Baldy Hutchinson."

The cobbler stood at the king's back, and when he had ended, lifted his voice and shouted, "God save the king!"

The mob heard the announcement in silence, and then a roar of laughter followed as they gazed at the two tattered figures on the edge of the platform. But the laughter was followed by an ominous howl of rage, as they understood that they were like to be cheated of a spectacle.

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